

THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS AND THE OBAMA DOCTRINE: CONTINUITY OR CHANGE?

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With a new period in US politics about to begin, discussion of the Obama Doctrine and its future is already underway. President Obama's administration has prized diplomacy over military confrontation, defence of the multilateral order and the mobilisation of international partners over unilateral action and has refocused the country's foreign affairs priorities. Now it remains to be seen to what extent the Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton, or the Republican, Donald Trump, will give continuity to his doctrine and legacy.

When President Obama arrived in the White House he received a country immersed in an economic crisis comparable to the years of the Great Depression, two wars (Iraq and Afghanistan) and a weather-beaten international image. At that time, he could count on the political support of a Democratic majority in Congress and his priority was to strengthen the country internally and internationally. For this, he considered it necessary to reaffirm the country's economic and military capacities but, above all, to recognise its limits when handling international crises. His reading of his predecessor's history showed that using military solutions and unilateral action to face international crises had left the country in a state of stress.

Since that point, President Obama has given reconsideration to diplomacy as the solution to conflicts and defended the creation of international coalitions for handling international crises. For Obama, American exceptionalism must emerge from its capacity to influence the international agenda and to mobilise actors who, according to him, traditionally expect American leadership. This principle – which is today known as “leading from behind” – was what led the president to demand European partners participate in the Libya crisis (2011), to decide the troops should leave Iraq and forces should be reduced in Afghanistan, and to promote a diplomatic way out of the chemical weapons crisis in Syria, the nuclear issue with Iran and the forming of an international coalition against ISIS.

For Obama the time had come to redefine the country's strategic priorities. Regions like Asia, Latin America and Africa had become

synonymous with the future, but little had been invested in them by comparison with the conflict regions in the Middle East. For this reason, during his administration President Obama began the normalisation of relations with Cuba and sought to shore up relations with Asia through the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP).

These principles, which are today becoming known as the Obama Doctrine, are the same that cost him support at home. For his detractors, the idea of an America that “leads from behind” is a role that is unfit for a global power like the United States. In their opinion, each time he apologised to the international community and avoided the military option when the red lines had already been drawn – such as in the case of Libya – Obama eroded the country’s credibility. These criticisms grew when President Obama lost Congress (2011) and the Senate (2014) to the Republican Party. Since then, ideology has been favoured over consensus, producing blockage of international laws and treaties, increased Supreme Court interference and more executive orders.

With the new presidency upon us, Hillary Clinton seems the most likely to maintain the Obama vision and legacy, although with marked differences. The Clinton formula echoes the defence of the multilateral international system and diplomacy as instruments of conflict resolution, but the military option seems less disposable. Her willingness to support the military intervention in Iraq (2003), her defence of military intervention in Libya (2011) and in Syria (2013), and her announcement that a firm hand would be shown with Iran if it did not comply with what was agreed in the nuclear agreement are proof of this.

Though Clinton has defended Obama’s tilt towards Asia and taken an active role in the negotiations of the TPP as secretary of state, it is an open question as to whether, as president, she would give continuity to Obama’s vision in the region. In fact, she has already cast doubt over continuing with the trade agreement with the Pacific partners. But Clinton has announced her desire to continue with other Obama initiatives such as the normalisation of relations with Cuba, the consideration of climate change as a risk to national security, the closure of Guantanamo and the fight against ISIS with international support.

While Clinton could represent continuity with the Obama Doctrine, Trump would be a definite break. For the Republican candidate, diplomacy and defence of the multilateral order must be subservient to more emphatic instruments such as unilateral action, economic sanctions, military intervention and the counterterrorist practices of the Bush era. Trump makes a clear defence in his programme of remilitarisation in Asia and the Middle East. In Asia, he intends to win a negotiating position for the United States against China and North Korea, in particular since the confirmation of the latter’s nuclear tests. In Syria, he would be prepared to negotiate an alliance with Russia in its fight against ISIS.

In his programme, Trump considers it necessary to realign the international alliances forged in recent years by President Obama. He points, above all, to those related with the nuclear deal with Iran, the trade agreement with Asia and the alliance with Japan and South Korea

in their fight against North Korea. What is more, Trump considers climate change to be a fiction and has made his commitment to fossil fuels clear. Finally, his policy of immigration and his xenophobic declarations on the refugee crisis have marked an agenda of restrictions, deportations and discrimination that goes against the welcoming, pluricultural vision of America put forward by Obama.

Ultimately, the United States decides on the future of the presidency faced with two antagonistic formulas and a Capitol Hill that is expected to remain divided. On the one hand, as has been seen, the Democratic option seems to assure the continuity of the Obama Doctrine and legacy. The difficulty is that Clinton has little sympathy in either house as a result of the scandal provoked by her management of email accounts and a crisis in Libya that ended with the death of four Americans. The Republican option before the country not only means a break from the Obama Doctrine and legacy, but also with the traditional principles of his own party, as many Republicans have demonstrated by withdrawing their support from their own candidate.

